

What's the Difference Between Informational Text and Nonfiction?

Often the terms “informational text” and “nonfiction” are used interchangeably. In our view, however, they are not the same. Informational text is a type of nonfiction—a very important type. Nonfiction includes any text that is factual. (Or, by some definitions, any type of literature that is factual, which would exclude texts such as menus and street signs.) Informational text differs from other types of nonfiction in purpose, features, and format.

Purpose

The primary purpose of informational text is to convey information about the natural or social world, typically from someone presumed to know that information to someone presumed not to, with particular linguistic features such as headings and technical vocabulary to help accomplish that purpose. By our definition, therefore, biography is nonfiction but is not informational text, because its primary purpose is to convey information about an individual's life. Procedural or how-to text is also nonfiction, but not informational text because its primary purpose is to tell someone how to do something, not convey information about some thing. Nonfiction narrative or “true stories” are also nonfiction but not informational text, because their primary purpose is to tell of an event or series of events that have occurred. This is not to say that biography, procedural text, nonfiction narrative, and other types of nonfiction are not important; they are just not the same as informational text.

Features

It is important to talk about the different types or genres of nonfiction not only because they have different purposes, but because they have different features to achieve those purposes. For example, biographies typically focus on a single individual and specific points in time.

In contrast, informational texts, as we define them, talk about whole classes of things and in a timeless way (for example, “Sharks live in water.”); they therefore have a generalizing quality. Other common features of informational texts include presentation and repetition of a topic or theme; descriptions of attributes and characteristic events; comparative/ contrastive and classifactory structures; technical vocabulary; realistic illustrations or photographs; labels and captions; navigational aids such as indexes, page numbers, and headings; and various graphical devices such as diagrams, tables, and charts. Many of these are not found in other types of nonfiction.(See Chapter 6 for more information.)

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